FOLLOW ME
Mark 2:13-14
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Mark wastes no words. Walking along the Galilee shore he saw two fisherman casting a net in the sea: Simon and Andrew. ("Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men. And immediately they left their nets and followed him.") A little later the same thing happened with two more brothers, James and John, in their boat mending a net. And finally Levi, sitting at his desk in the tax office: ("Follow Me".) And he rose and followed him. It's just as simple and yet complicated as that.

Simple because there is no more to it: no explanation, no persuasion, no discussion, no accounting of what they did about the boat they left behind, or the unmended net, or the tax form incomplete at an empty desk. Simple, because there is nothing about what Jesus saw in them or what they saw in him. Just the command, ("Follow me",) and the response ("and immediately they got up and followed".) Simple, but complicated, because something in us rebels at taking it very seriously. They couldn't simply have dropped what they were doing and followed a total stranger. We can't identify with that kind of behavior. We can't imagine ourselves doing anything remotely like that.

~~But they did, and~~ In telling it like that we have to assume that Mark wanted his readers to be stunned by what happened: to be skeptical and quizzical about this very ~~improbable~~ improbable behavior. We have to assume that there is an author's intentionality behind this spare accounting; and that, therefore, there is much to be learned about Christian Faith and discipleship in reflecting on what he said - or what he left unsaid.

History has not been very fair with those men Jesus recruited to be his disciples. For centuries they were romanticized as "super Christians"; tradition attributed to them remarkable powers and skills: churches were named for them - St. Peter's in Rome - named after that rough fisherman who talked too much and too loudly, and who was better at fighting it out with a sword than contemplating the theology of the suffering servant. And in those churches - named with their names - they have stood solemnly, enshrined in stained glass. As a child I can remember sitting in the pew looking up at them following a white-robed, Anglo Saxon Jesus, and feeling absolutely nothing. They were supermen: ~~bigger than life; they were saints - canonized & made different from all the people I knew which meant I took them with about the same degree of seriousness as Captain Marvel.~~

Recently, the skepticism of the 1970's has demythologized the disciples. Having

stood so many centuries as captives of leaded glass, our age has enjoyed bringing them down to size. We're willing to look at the complexity of a Judas, the humanity of Peter, the sometimes pettiness of John. Some efforts have gone even further: in Jesus Christ Superstar they come off rather badly. At the beginning they sound irrevelant, dull. "What's the buzz? Tell me what's happening - When do we ride into Jerusalem?" they sing - like a motorcycle gang following a misguided Hollywood leader. And then at the last supper - with Jesus engaged in an impassioned discourse with Judas they sound incbriated and totally insensitive:

"Look at all my trials and tribulations
Sinking in the gentle pool of wine
What's that in the bread it's gone to my head
Till this morning is this evening life is fine,
Always hoped that I'd be an Apostle
Knew that I would make it if I tried
Then when we retire we can write the gospels
So they'll all talk about us when we've died."

Well, somewhere between those two extremes: Tim Rice's eleven drunks in J.C. Superstar and the stained glass disciples lies the reality of those men Jesus called and who followed. And through their experience you and I are given the most there is to know about being a Christian and being a disciple. Premise here is that there are no gradations of Christianity -- Discipleship is not the honorary degree of the Christian academy: it is, rather, one and the same thing. To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ - a simple premise, but not a very popular one obviously because the first thing you and I do is ask Who? Why? Where? a disciple does is get up and follow, and the first thing

The author of the second Gospel - Mark - was anything but naive. He wanted us to be startled by the account and to ask those three questions. The story he wrote was no more believable then than it is now. Two thousand years separate us, of course, but men didn't get up and leave the office to follow an itinerant preacher into an unknown future then either. And we have to assume that this unlikely behavior is more than a simple report of what happened: it is, rather, loaded with content and potential.

It is, by the way, quite in line with what emerges out of the Old Testament as a work-

ing definition of Faith. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews had one foot in the Old Testament past, and held up for his readers a list of ~~vulnerable~~ venerable people: Noah, Abraham, Issac, Jacob and Moses: and the one thing they had in common was that they obeyed the will of God without having any idea where it was going to lead. ("These all died in faith", he wrote, "not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar.") And out of the mysterious legends the Jews told each other across the centures we heard the story of those three intrepid souls, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who decided on a fiery furnace rather than betraying the God they followed. Confident men they were, and my whole conception of their story changed when I read the little disclaimer they threw into their brave talk... ("Our God will deliver us...But if not...we will not serve your gods") It's one thing, that is to say, to walk into a fiery furnace, or an unknown future - knowing that God is going to bale you out. It's another thing altogether not to know how it's going to turn out. That, I discovered, is the point of the story in the Book of Daniel; not that God rescued his men from the death the King had planned - but that they didn't know and remained faithful in spite of not knowing.

That's what faith means in the Bible. Acting without any guarantees that all will work out in the end: following the will of God in the face of a lot of very pragmatic reasons for staying put. And that, I would suggest, is what Mark had in mind in these spare little accounts of men getting up and following Jesus.

Let's think out loud about our feelings. It's not that we have anything against discipleship or following Jesus. It's just that we're most uncomfortable making that kind of commitment without knowing exactly who it is we are following and where he's going to take us. In terms of our religion, being a Christian is a pretty safe bet. In the first place, it's not something we ever had to make a decision about. Some of us were baptized and brought up in the Church and it never occured to us that we could be anything but Christian. Others of us had little to do with the CHurch as children, but we were part of a culture that simply assumes that being a patriotic ~~American~~ citizen and staying out of trouble is synonymous with being a Christian. Deciding to be a follower of Jesus Christ is just not a part of our experience. And if by chance, our joining the institutional church was somehow interpreted as an act of following - and not just joining

another club - it was probably done with a very minimum of risk and cost - in fact our families and friends and employers were probably rather happy about it.

All of which is to say that we have trouble even contemplating Mark's description of Jesus saying to Levi - "Follow me" and Levi getting up and following. But what if we do contemplate it? What if we try to get into his shoes? What then? I think we'll still go for the safe bet. If we're talking specifically about Mark 2:13 and 14 we're going to try to explain away what appears to be irrational and irresponsible behavior. We're going to say that actually Levi had known Jesus for a long time: he had, in fact, been giving serious consideration to becoming a disciple. He had talked it over with his wife and family, submitted his resignation to his boss and had carefully planned to follow the next time he had a chance.

Or if we're sitting behind that desk we're going to protect ourselves by throwing a theological wrench into the gears. ("How do we know he's really the Christ? How can we be sure that he's authentically God's Messiah? Who is he anyway?" And if we ever get around to following it's going to be after we get some answers to our questions, after we know who he is and what he wants of us. The late Dietrick Bonhoeffer was a theologian who gave a lot of thought to the matter of Christian Discipleship. Listen to what he wrote:

> "With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even to put it into practice; but it can never be followed in personal obedience. Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship. And Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity with Christ."
> (The Cost of Discipleship, P. 50)

The New Testament, particulary this brief incident from Mark, turns around our ideas of what it means to have faith and to be a Christian. It has very little to do with understanding theology; Jesus did not give Levi an examination in basic doctrine. It has even less to do with morality; Jesus didn't interogate Levi about his past behavior; he didn't ask him to read the Bible, give up this or that, abide by a new set

of rules. He simply said "Follow me", and in the act of following Levi became a disciple and Christian.

The happy part of that is that it means Jesus has a lot of followers who don't even know his name, and who perhaps don't even believe in God. The discomforting part is that it takes away a lot of the ways we have been used to defining faith. And puts you and me rather on the spot. It doesn't ask the questions we can answer; like - "how much do you believe? Have you been good?" Instead it asks simply "Have you followed?"

There is demand in this little confrontation. There is that personal demand to be honest about our practice of Christian Faith. There is a demand here also, I believe, for the Church. The Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is filtered through the institutional Church is usually rendered pretty harmless. Somehow it always comes out sounding insipid. "Come to Jesus: take him into your heart: walk with him in the garden: accept him as your savior" and it all sounds like - a better deal than term insurance and a lot cheaper. When, in fact, he said "Follow me.. get up and move - come along behind as we walk into this unknown future - feed my sheep - heal my children - set my friends free - take up a cross and stumble along if you can".

There is a lot of demand in seeing faith as obedience: Christianity as discipleship. But there is comfort too. It is the testimony of the Church across the centuries that obedience to Jesus Christ is not slavery, but the very best kind of freedom. It is the continuing affirmation that real life is to be found in giving oneself away as a disciple. He talked about rewards. He said that he had come to give full and complete life, joy and happiness, peace and security. That's as much a part of the Gospel as it is a part of our own thinking. To be human is to ask - "What's in it for me?" No One's motives are pure: even people who go to the remotest part of the globe to be medical missionaries - do so, at least in part, because it makes them feel good to do so. Part of the reason for the Peace Corp's initial popularity in my Country was that it was an admirable thing to do - people thought the Peace Corps volunteers were pretty interesting and noble.

We can't get away from that: and Jesus, thank God, didn't even try. He said "Follow me - and I'll make you into something you never were before. Get up and go - and you'll find a peace that has always illuded you." The comfort here is that you and I are acceptable

to him just as we are - just as Levi the tax collector was: and that when we do follow him we suddenly realize what it means to be alive.

Where will he lead? I don't know, and it would violate everything I've said thus far if I tried to guess. But I do know that salvation is to hear that call and to follow. I do know that the two saving words of the Gospel are "follow me".

Someone has written a little vignette to describe the tenor of modern life. It goes like this:

"Some men die by shrapnel
And some go down in flames
But most men perish, inch by inch
In play at little games."

"Follow me" can save us from that.

The story is told how the sailors of Sir Francis Drake "used to sit on the rocky coasts of England, telling the country lads, not about the pleasure of the sea, but of its dangers; they talked of stout winds and gallant ships riding out the storms, until those contry boys wanted it so much they would run away from home to be a part of it." (George Peters, The Protestant Hour, P. 52)

→ There's something like that in the words of Jesus, "Follow Me". And there is something deep down in all of us longing to respond - to get up and follow. AMEN

Startle us when we become lethargic, Our Father. In all the demands that are placed upon us, help us to hear the only one that matters ultimately. And give us courage to follow - Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN